COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

An egalitarian model of university-school partnerships starts with a theoretical frame of equity and social justice. This qualitative research study sought to understand high school students' perception of community service through an intergenerational university-high school-elementary school partnership. Data analysis consisted of detailed notes collected from university faculty who oversaw the focus group discussions and two graduate assistants who took observational notes. These notes were analyzed and thematically organized. The findings indicate that the students enjoyed the experience and were highly motivated to complete and read their community themed book for the younger children in their community. This research contributes new knowledge to the field of community engagement and to the field of informal and formal education through its analysis of discussions on meaningful community service pertaining to university-school collaborative partnerships.

Keywords: community engagement, school partnerships, collaboration, service, social justice

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1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly more universities and faculty are seeking to develop meaningful ways to engage their students with local or global communities[1]. The need to continually rethink the "what" and "how" we engage students has become paramount in higher education. In addition, there is an increasing demand to not only juggle competing interests, needs and resources of campuses, faculty, and students with those of community partners, but to also develop meaningful pedagogies of engagement that can result in transformative[2], as opposed to transactional[3], relationships. Calls for universities to engage communities through service learning, civic engagement, and scholarship have been made for over a century[4]. In fact, John Dewey famously called for such pedagogical advances in his Pedagogic Creed in 1897.

This study consisted of focus group discussions with fourteen high school students who attended field trips to either the National Civil Rights Museum in Tennessee or/and the Japanese American Internment Museum in Arkansas. The participants then created and read their books to the elementary students in two public schools in a southern state in North America, discussed their experiences from attending a field trip and their perceptions on developing and reading their stories to elementary children. This was an intergenerational and multi-academic leveled activity, wherein high school students explored social justice concerns through interactive field trips to sites in the Southeastern United States, a geographic region where there has been historical inequality among racial and socio-economic lines, particularly for African-Americans. We chose this activity because,

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[1]   Deborah Romero, "The Power of Stories to Build Partnerships and Shape Change", *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* 6, no. 1 (2012): 11.

[2]   Judith Ramaley, "Embracing Civic Responsibility", *Campus Compact Reader* 1, no. 2 (2000): 1.

[3]   Sandra Enos, Keith Morton, "Developing a Theory and Practice of Campus–Community Partnerships", in *Building Partnerships for Service Learning,* ed. Barbara Jacoby (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003). 20–41.

[4]   Stephen Danley, Gayle Christiansen, "Conflicting Responsibilities: The Multi-Dimensional Ethics of University/Community Partnerships", *Journal of Community Engagement & Scholarship* 11, no. 2 (2019): 1.

as researchers we recognize that storytelling is a powerful tool for community engagement and for raising awareness about cultural diversity and social justice issues[5].

The public high school, whose students participated in this study, was in its first year of being integrated. Previously, there were two public high schools. One was on the "white" side of town and the other on the "black" side of town. In the fall of 2018, due to a federal court mandate, the two schools merged into one public high school and the newly integrated school was situated on the "white" side of town. Similarly, there were two segregated middle schools combined and the new middle school is on the "black" side of town. A regionally recognized public university sought to build rapport with the newly formed high school, focusing on the theme of community. Social justice concerns are ever present in public education and race plays a role. For example, the choice to attend the National Civil Rights Museum in Tennessee or the Japanese American Internment Museum in Arkansas, decisions to attend one or the other were sharply divided along racial lines. At both the high school and university level more African-American students chose to attend the National Civil Rights Museum and more white students chose to attend the Japanese American Internment Museum.

This study focused on high school students' perceptions of a community partnership activity that involved a variety of stakeholders, i.e., university faculty/students, high school faculty/students and elementary school faculty/students, which focused on group discussions surrounding social justice. We believe that when stakeholders come together as partners to exchange knowledge, and resources, opportunities for members to develop the relationships essential to creating healthy communities are presented[6]. Through the collaborative efforts of partners from a local school district, community organizations, and an institution of higher education, we were able to create opportunities for students to engage in activities designed to support our goal of community engagement focused upon social justice.

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5   Romero, *The Power of Stories to Build Partnerships*, 12.
6   Mary D. Burbank, Rosemarie Hunter, "The Community Advocate Model: Linking Communities, School Districts, and Universities to Support Families and Exchange Knowledge", *Journal of Community Engagement & Scholarship* 1, no. 1 (2008): 48.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the importance of understanding and building engaging democratic spaces where new constructs are built in order to promote social justice. This qualitative study sought to answer the following research questions:

How do secondary education students express their perceptions of community through authoring a children's book?

How do high school students feel about being authored?

How do they perceive their reception from the elementary students?

What were the benefits they received from this community service?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research originated from a university faculty member and a high school teacher. Throughout the intention was to have all collaborative partners, including the high school students, involved in the process. The premise of this research was to develop a collaborative space among education community members that drew on each member's strengths. This collaborative, or democratic, space served to support the notion that "engagement emphasizes a two-way approach in which institutions and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge to address societal needs"[7]. Each stakeholder in the community takes on different roles based on their expertise, for example teacher educators bring their research abilities and skills at assisting pre-service teachers; on the other hand, seasoned teachers bring the expertise of student knowledge and school culture[8]. In effect, democratization is linked to university-school collaborative partnership.

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[7]   David J. Weerts, Lorilee R. Sandmann, "Community Engagement and Boundary-Spanning Roles at Research Universities", *The Journal of Higher Education* 81, no. 6 (2010): 632.

[8]   Kenneth Zeichner, Katherina A. Payne A. K., Kate Brayko, "Democratizing Teacher Education", *Journal of Teacher Education* 66, no. 2 (2015): 6.

With this in mind, there was an emphasis on building partnerships through shared responsibility[9]. Implicit in this idea was the notion of building trust through addressing concerns surrounding social justice. The concept for this research originated with a university faculty member and a high school teacher seeking a way to bring their students (high school and university) to a museum surrounding social justice. In order to develop authentic community engagement there needs to be three essential components:

"(1) being physically located at the school or community site in order to build trust and become integrated into the life of the school or community, (2) conducting community studies in order to learn about and understand the lives of community members, and (3) becoming involved in community engagement activities"[10].

Noel contended that "trust" needs to be established. This research study takes place in a geographical area where trust has not been established across racial and socio-economic lines and where there are clear inequalities. Our study was possible because of the trust established between the university faculty and a high school teacher. Their trust in one another created a foundation to develop this interactive collaborative project across academic institutions. In Noel's study, the faculty member made numerous trips to the high school and exchanged multiple emails with the lead teacher, school administration, and district administration. Similarly, the university faculty and high school teacher made time in their schedules to coordinate activities and worked together to ensure a smooth foundation.

Haddix maintained, "community engagement can get at issues of race and racism, equity and inequality, and social justice and injustices more pointedly than reading scholarly articles, learning new methods and ped-

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9   Lorena Guillen, Ken Zeichner, (2018). "A University-Community Partnership in Teacher Education from the Perspectives of Community-Based Teacher Educators", *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2: 149.

10   Jana Noel, "Striving for Authentic Community Engagement: A Process Model from Urban Teacher Education", *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement,* 15, no. 1 (2011): 31.

agogies, or completing student teaching placements"[11]. Finally, Safrit contended that sustaining authentic engagement requires efforts on the part of university-community partnerships to (a) address ongoing mutual needs and interests over time, (b) reflect collaborative, reciprocal and scholarly work; (b) require active involvement in communities (c) value and engage a diversity of people, expertise, and culture; (d) utilize authentic processes for learning, teaching, integration and investigation in and with communities; and (e) have institutional philosophies and core values embedded in the tenets of democracy, collaborative leadership, and mutual respect.[12] This research study sought to understand the complexities of community relations by looking through the lens of high school students engaged in a multilevel community service project.

4. METHODS

Merriam and Grenier argued that, "qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals interacting with their world"[13]; and that qualitative researchers explore, "how individuals experience and interact with their social world, and the meaning it has for them, is based on an interpretive (or constructivist) perspective"[14]. This study is an interpretive and descriptive qualitative study in that the researchers' focus is on "understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon"[15]. The focus here is on how high school students make meaning from an intergenerational community social justice activity.

The intention of this research was to address the problem of inequality through an intergenerational university driven community activity.

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[11] Marcelle Haddix, "Preparing Community-Engaged Teachers", *Theory into Practice,* 54, no. 1 (2015): 69.

[12] 12. Safrit, R. Dale, "The Guest Editor's Page", *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement,* 15 no. 3 (2011): 1.

[13] Sharan B. Merriam and Robin S. Grenier, *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis.* 2nd ed (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2019), 3.

[14] Merriam, and Grenier, *Qualitative Research in Practice*, 4.

[15] Ibidem.

Merriam and Grenier maintained that action research, "is conducted by those who want to address some problem or issue in their workplace or community and take action based on the findings"[16]. Our interest was to have readers learn from this research to inform university social justice community driven projects. As a result, we sought and received approval from the university institutional review board approved, and funding for the field trips was acquired through university and outside grants. These grants mainly served to cover the cost of the two field trips to ensure equal access regardless of income.

5. PARTICIPANTS

The participant population was purposefully selected. Eighty-eight individuals from the university and high school participated in this activity, 51 eleventh and twelfth grade students from the public high school, and 37 university students majoring in education and/or adolescents in their junior/senior year. From those 51 high school students, 17 (33%) created 11 books.

6. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of focus group discussions with 14 high school students who created and read their books to the students. High school participants discussed their experience from attending the field trips and their perceptions on developing and reading their stories to elementary children. Originally, 51 high school students (grades 11 and 12) attended one of two interactive field trips, Japanese American Internment Museum in Arkansas (29) and/or National Civil Rights Museum (24). Two of the participants attended both trips. Thereafter, the 51 high school students were asked to participate in a community project where they created books for first grade students.

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[16] Ibidem, 11

Over a three-month period during the spring semester of 2018, the 17-high school authors participated in three workshops co-organized and co-conducted by high teachers and university faculty. A workshop was held at the high school with the 51 high school students to explain the community service project that would have them use their experience from the trips to write a book and read those books to elementary students in a nearby public school. The participants were asked to write their books on the theme of community. They were told that they would then have an opportunity to read their books to elementary school children and participate in focus group discussions surrounding their experience.

The initial workshop provided training on how to translate their experience into books that were appropriate for first and/or second grader readers. The first presentation introduced the concept of creating mini-books for first-second grade students surrounding the theme community and based on their experiences from the field trips that they attended. Faculty from the university, and teachers from the high school provided step-by-step instructions, word lists, and brought in over 15 examples of story books, informational stories and moral tales. In this workshop, the elementary and secondary faculty co-designed with the English and social studies teachers how to write a children's book leveled to the kindergarten-first-second grade level.

Kindergarten through first grade was selected because there are a variety of reading abilities and the elementary school had not yet been chosen. After this initial workshop, over the course of six weeks, the 17 participants attended two additional workshops. In these sessions, the university secondary education faculty member assisted participants to develop their books.

The second workshop occurred two weeks later, where faculty clarified and explained the details of creating the books by providing two sizes of mini-blank books, a rubric peer check list, and more book examples. Although we had originally envisioned the participants working on individual books, the participants requested to work in pairs or groups of three explaining that one could write and another illustrate. Interestingly, in the second workshop none of the drafts were informational in nature. When shown examples of informational, storybooks and books with moral tales, one group commented "that's boring" and a second group asked to borrow the moral lesson books.

The third workshop session, provided a space to have the participants discuss their ideas and gather further ideas from one another. After a series of three supportive workshops to facilitate the book creations, the 17 participants created 11 books on the kindergarten to first grade reading level.

The community activity culminated with 16 of the 17 students reading their books to 83 kindergarten and first grade students. One participant had a medical emergency and the co-author read their book.

Seventeen of the 51 participants, 33%, agreed to participate in the next phase of study, the focus groups. The data collection consisted of focus group discussions with 14 of the 17 participants who wrote the mini-books and read their books to children. Two students read their book to the students, but were unable to attend the focus group discussions because of a work commitment. Specifically, two focus group discussions consisted of six guiding questions (Appendix A) asked to 14 of the 16 authors (two readers left due to outside work commitments) who had read their books to the elementary students. One of the 17 participants was unable to due to a medical emergency. One group had six participants and the other had eight participants.

Since this research takes place in a small town (approximate population of 12,000), the high school students were asked at which one of the six elementary schools they would like to read their stories. One elementary school stood out representing the theme of community (three of the 17 students said they had graduated from that school and still visited occasionally). One student suggested another school with the remaining students not voicing an opinion. The university faculty member sought out the school that the three students suggested. When the researcher reached out to the administration of the school (after first acquiring school district superintendent authorization), she sent examples of the high school student's books. The principal expressed enthusiasm to have her students participate and thought the level was geared toward kindergarten and first grade. This elementary school is one of two magnet elementary schools in the town and it is required to maintain a diverse enrollment balance. Further, this elementary school has the highest test scores on the third-grade reading level and is the number one ranked elementary school in the town. Our intention was not to select a high performing school but to

have the participants chose a school they wanted to connect to and/or they perceived as representing community.

The participants read their books to the elementary students in the university library. There were 83 kindergarten (44) and first grade (39) students broken into 11 groups. The groups were organized based on grade level and ranged from six to eight students per group. The 16 high school authors divided among the 11 groups (six groups were single authored). The kindergarten and first grade students rotated after each reading enabling all eleven groups of kindergarten/first grade students to listen to all the stories. After the reading, 14 of the 16 high school students divided into two groups and we conducted focus group discussions using the focus group discussion tool (Appendix A). Responses were recorded and the notes combined to find emerging themes from the 14 participants.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis consisted of detailed notes collected by university faculty who oversaw the focus group discussions and two graduate assistants who took observational notes. These notes were analyzed and thematically organized. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), "qualitative research, data analysis is simultaneous with data collection"[17]. Further, "simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the research to adjust along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to 'test' emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data"[18]. Applying this concept to this study, we focused on the participants ideas to develop and organize the emergence of themes.

The results revealed how the high school student participants defined community and their interest in service activities. Overall, all 14 focus group discussion participants believed that the field trips, creating their books and reading to the elementary students was a rewarding experience. They all agreed that reading their books to the children was enjoyable and that it got better each time they read their book. Interestingly, they

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[17] Ibidem, 15
[18] Ibidem.

also noted that towards the seventh reading the children looked tired and bored. The four elementary school teachers also remarked that eleven books over the course of an hour was a lot for kindergarten and first grade students.

The high school participants also agreed that this activity benefited the young authors, as well as the kindergarten and first graders. The participants seemed to take the responsibility of expanding the younger students' understanding of community seriously by encouraging them to ask and answer questions to clarify their stories. This was an inter-generational undertaking where high school students used their books to pass along their understanding of community to their younger peers.

The focus group discussion tool (Appendix A) contains six guiding questions that sought to answer the main research questions: 1) How do secondary education students express their perceptions of community through authoring a children's book? 2) How do high school students feel about being authored? 3) How do they perceive their reception from the elementary students? And 4) What were the benefits they received from this community service?

8. FINDINGS

In general, the findings indicated that the participants grew socio-emotionally from this collaborative university-high school-elementary school experience. This type of research delved into the informal learning spaces and looked at collaboration among key stakeholders in educational settings. The findings were guided by the above questions and thematically organized into the following themes: community, benefits, participants' perceptions of listeners, experience sharing, and participant recommendations.

9. COMMUNITY

Lester, Kronick, & Benson contended that, "university students who spend time volunteering have also changed their perspectives and sense of

civic responsibility"[19]. Although they were discussing the benefits for university students, in this case study this is was a finding for the high school participants in this study. This research delved into whether high school student's perspectives changed on their civic responsibilities, particularly in the understanding of community. The focus of this research is on understanding how the high school participants interpreted community and how this was expressed in their book. Interestingly, they became quite reflective in designing their book to be of interest to the elementary students. They designed the book with the children in mind. It was a selfless endeavor and demonstrated their interest in building a community.

In response to the first question, 'how do secondary education students express their perceptions of community through authoring a children's book?', 100% of the participants stated that their understanding of community was broadened from the field trips, developing the book, and reading the book to the children. Participant comments that summarized the idea that their definition of community expanded included: "Yes, it changed", "I use to think community was just an area, now I know it includes making friends who may be different from me", "Community includes all races", "Communities don't have barriers or boarders", "Community means all who stand up for a cause", and "Community includes people who are different but they love each other anyway".

One of the most reflective participant comment stated, "I used to not think kids were a meaningful part of the community but this experiences showed me they are also important members of the community". This represented a shift in thinking from kids are not meaningful, to kids being important players in the community. The authors inferred this to mean the high school participants perceived they were empowered through these activities.

Along similar lines, participants perceived their role as expanding the definition of community for the children. The participants incorporated this expanded view of community into their books. An example of this was a participant who stated he put an expanded view of community into his book by writing 'hello' in a variety of languages. Another exam-

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[19]   Jessica Nina Lester, Bob Kronick, Mark Benson, "A University Joins the Community", *Kappan Magazine* 93, no. 6 (2012): 44.

ple is a participant who stated she created a book where people looked different "to demonstrate that we have different personalities". Further, another participant emphasized that "community meant working together to make a better place". Two other participants agreed that, "a community is defined as a group that stands together to make change and that this is not defined by race". Overwhelmingly, participants agreed this was an enjoyable experience, which expanded their definition of community.

10. PERCEIVED BENEFITS

Regarding research question two, 'how do high school students feel about being authored?' we followed up this question by asking whether they shared their experiences with their parents, guardians, and community members. Also connected to this question were the responses to questions four and five on the focus discussion tool – 'who do you think benefitted most from this project and what were the benefits you received from this community service?'

The fourteen participants explained that they had benefited by learning about their community. Participants' comments ranged from having discussions surrounding social justice with their parents – one participant stated, "My mother gave me the idea for my book" – to having discussions about community with friends and family. Ten participants said that their families were proud of them for working on this project.

Two of the 14 participants noted that their classroom teacher was giving them extra credit, but that that was not the driving force. Four of the participants commented that they needed the community hours, which worked toward their graduation requirements. Two of the 14 participants said they would put this experience on their resume. Two participants mentioned this was off their "bucket list" and one of these participants commented, "I have wanted to be an author since seventh grade. I feel great, like I really did something".

Ten of the students commented that these activities led them to make new friends and learn about people who are different from them. During this question discussion, one participant said, "People are different but [we need to] love each other anyway; it is important to donate [our time

and abilities to] help others'. Seven of the participants brought up other relevant community related projects that they completed for community service. These included: 'walks for breast cancer awareness and talking to elementary students about the importance of exams".

In summary, all 14 participants contended that this intergenerational activity was beneficial and that it was important to involve the "little kids". Summarizing these ideas one participant stated, "I feel humbled that I could write a book and have so much excitement from the children because of my book". Similarly, another participant commented, "I feel closer to the community. I felt involved in the children's learning".

11. PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS

The theme Participant Perceptions of listeners emerged in response to research question 3, 'How do the participants perceive their reception from the elementary students?' All 14 participants expressed their belief that the children thought it was a good experience. The participants used the following terms to describe how the children received them reading their book: "ecstatic" "cool", and "awesome". One participant noted, "a lot of the kids wanted the book". However, the participant did not state how many kids wanted a copy of the book. Eight participants mentioned that they also received positively by the elementary school teachers and teacher assistants. One participant commented that she "felt closer to the community [and] involved in their learning process". Another participant noted that she felt it was important to get "involved [because] they are our future" and "the future of our community". Another participant stated that it was "great to educate children on new topics". They felt that the students asked a lot of question.

The high school participants reflected critically on the elementary school students. One participant summarized the experience by stating, the "first and kindergarten students were very happy to be here". Two of the participants differentiated between the two groups stating, "the kindergarteners needed more pictures, but the first graders were grabbing the books to read it themselves". Three students said they were conscious of writing the book on an appropriate grade level and that they changed

the wording in their books to simpler words. The participants also noted the level of reading was higher than they expected and that this was an advanced group of kids from a special school. Two participants commented that first grade students "took the books to read" themselves.

Although they felt the students to be high academically, they also felt the concepts were to advanced, therefore they focused on simpler ideas rather than the historical content of the museums. One participant shared that the Japanese American Internment Museum may not have been understood at such a young age.

12. EXPERIENCE SHARING

The theme Experience Sharing emerged in response to research question 4, 'What were the benefits they received from this community service project?' The focus group discussion question number six asked students to add any ideas or comments that were not previously discussed. This was done to provide them a space to discuss any aspect of the project.

All 14 commented that they enjoyed donating their time to helping others. Further, participants commented on how the children perceived them. One participant stated, "They questioned if I wrote the book and were so awed that I did". On publishing a book, made one participant said she felt emboldened stating, "I can do anything". They made friends while completing this project and came to the conclusion that being different means they can still love each other. Critically reflecting on their overall experience and after having the children listen to 'the many stories on community, four of the participants agreed that they had developed a new understanding of community. This new definition was 'broader'. All 14 commented that it was a good experience and they were happy to have been a part of the project. One participant stated that, "it felt good to help children extend their understanding of community". Another participant commented that, they "would do it again with older children." This comment provoked a little laughter from the group and sparking another student to note the difficulties of working with young children.

Interestingly, along similar lines, all fourteen explained that they had shared their story with their mother and discussed it with their friends.

These experiences demonstrated that the students sought to revise and sharpen their stories. Two explained they had practiced reading their book and had shown their book to a cousin and/or younger sister. They commented that those people had liked it and that encouraged them. Clarifying, they explained that they shared their book because they were proud of their accomplishments. Another participant commented that he practiced reading his book on his four-year-old sister. The participant went on to explain that his sister "told him to add more pictures". Another participant noted reading her book to a 19-year-old cousin who commented, 'that it was good and flowed well'. These sharing experiences illustrate how this collaborative activity fostered students to self-reflect and critically think about their field experiences and community activity.

13. PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

All 14 of the participants agreed that there should be more collaborative partnerships among the various stakeholders. In particular, they shared their belief that there should be collaborative field trips and field experiences for students to "branch out". Similarly, one participant commented that he "wished all schools had these chances". Another participant compared the elementary school students visiting the college campus for the reading to their travel to the Japanese American Internment Museum and/or National Civil Rights Museum stating, "all trips were educational and fun". He went on to argue there should be more field based learning trips.

Following up on this concept, two students in one of the focus group discussions mentioned the lack of opportunities to participate on field trips when they were in elementary school. There was awareness that some elementary schools have greater access and opportunities than other elementary schools. The two elementary schools cited as lacking opportunity were exclusively African-American. The magnet school, which is required to maintain a diverse population, was the only school that provided opportunities. One student stated, "all schools should have that opportunity [because] trips served to educate". The participants also weighed in on the importance of making reading an interactive process and the need to provide books students enjoy. Similarly, 12 of the 14 stated said they did

not talk about the trip details because they believed it would have been hard for the children to understand the concepts of inequality and social justice embedded in the two field trips.

These findings add to the field of study surrounding community engagement through formal and informal spaces. This is significant for understanding how to build better community relationships surrounding social justice themes through intergenerational academic partnerships.

14. LIMITATIONS

The full scope of this project took a year from spring 2017 to spring 2018 (from organizing the trips to the publication of the books). One limitation was time. More high school seniors might have participated given the time. In addition, during the focus group discussion, four of the participants requested to have us organize a book reading with another elementary school. Two other participants expressed the importance of involving other schools. A local public librarian also wanted the students to read their books at the public library. Unfortunately, the semester ended and participants were getting ready for final exams and college.

Another limitation was attrition. Only 17 of the initial 51 high schools students who attended the trip agreed to create the books for the elementary school students. Five expressed interest but had other obligations. Further, the two high school English and social studies teachers also expressed the difficulties of students volunteering due to a range of other commitments that included senior activities.

Similarly, we conducted this research in a deeply impoverished community which resulted in multiple inefficiencies, which were particularly evident in the publication of the participants' books. For example, six of the 11 books had mistakes that frustrated the participants reading the book. This ranged from missing pages to pages being cut off. Due to the time constraints, the revised books were not completed in time for the participants to read their book to the children.

Lastly, the high school participants were not trained to read to kindergarten-first grade students. We provided a quick overview that emphasized showing pictures and engaging the audience. In the focus group discus-

sions, three of the participants commented on how, after reading their book the first time to the students, they quickly learned they needed to engage the audience.

15. DISCUSSION

This research is original in that it sought to understand high school students' perceptions of community through an interlinked partnership activity that included discussions of social justice concerns amongst diverse generations of students. The setting for the research, the Southeastern United States, is also unique in that it is still deeply divided along racial and socio-economic lines. From the participants' responses to their involvement in this university administered social justice project there were many benefits for those involved. This study highlights ways a university can promote social justice and community through its administrative actions. Further, the findings of this study add to the field of study surrounding community engagement through formal and informal spaces. We posit that universities should be tasked with building community partnerships and relationships surrounding social justice themes through intergenerational academic partnerships. John Dewey stated, "I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction"[20]. We concur.

The findings from this study add to the field of community service and university to school community engagement partnerships. Further research, could delve into the perceptions of the pre-service teachers who attended the social justice field trips with the high school students. Did they gain valuable field experience and/or knowledge of adolescents? Lester, Kronick, & Benson argued the importance of building community and the benefits to pre-service teachers[21]. The authors contended, "Education done in and with the community can play a central role in addressing sys-

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[20] John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed", *The School Journal*, 54, no. 3 (1897): 79.

[21] Lester, Kronick Benson, *A University Joins the Community*.

temic inequalities and providing academic and nonacademic learning for students" (p. 43). The high school participants perceived the inequalities of their community. This was evident in the findings where twelve of the fourteen participants in the focus group discussions questioned the opportunities of the elementary children's exposure to visiting a college campus based on which elementary school they attended. Thereby, implying the racial divisions in their community limited opportunities.

Further, the findings hint that this type of community experience served to develop empathy in the participants to empathize towards the elementary students. For example, all 14 participants related and connected this experience to their own childhood. This led to a discussion in one of the focus groups on the inequalities in academic settings. Therefore, these collaborative activities provided safe spaces for the high school participants to critically reflect on social justice challenges. There was a clear emphasis among all participants that all children should have these types of experimental learning opportunities. This research supports the notion of the importance of creating collaborative spaces with various educational stakeholders to engage in discussions surrounding social justice to foster and co-create new knowledge[22].

Because higher education is a social institution[23], it has an implicit responsibility to serve the public that created, and sustains, it financially through tuition, government grants and contracts, corporate giving and partnerships, and public philanthropy. In fact, public land-grant colleges and universities were founded on "ideals that recognized the need to apply knowledge-based solutions to societal challenges, requiring that researchers work with people outside academia as partners with as much to offer as to learn"[24]. This community engagement project provided the high school participants a space to openly discuss the inequalities in their community. The participants shared that there were clear differences among their own elementary school experiences, and there was a shared consensus around

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[22] Weerts, and Sandmann, *Community Engagement and Boundary-Spanning Roles.*

[23] Frank Fear, "Neoliberalism Comes to Higher Education," *Future U* (blog), February 14, 2015, http://futureu.education/uncategorized/neoliberalism-comes-to-higher-education/.

[24] Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Lou Anna K. Simon, "The World Grant Ideal and Engagement Scholarship", *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 16, no. 3 (2012): 34.

the unfairness of inequities in the school system. The concept of social justice and importance of building community served as focal points for this study. Participants agreed that the field experiences expanded their minds and the lack of these opportunities created an inequitable schooling experience.

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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Central Research Question: How do secondary education students express their perceptions of community through authoring a children's book?

1. How do you feel about being authored? Did you talk about this project with family? Friends? Did you show your book to anyone? Who? Why? Why not? Explain. Provide an example.

2. How do you perceive your reception from the elementary students?

3. How did you define community? Did this change during the course of the semester? When you went on the trip? Developed the book? Read to the kids? Explain and provide a specific example.

4. Who do you think benefitted from this project? Explain.

5. Did you receive any benefits from this project? Co-authoring the book? Reading the book? Interacting with the children? Explain.

6. Please add other ideas or comments you have about this project.